

BIRDS SEEN ALONG A MOUNTAIN TRAIL IN PAKISTAN¹

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(*With two text-figures*)

As anyone who has ever walked the Himalaya knows, this vast and complex chain is extraordinarily rich in bird life. One of the true pleasures of the walker or climber is to keep an eye out for, among other facets of nature, the interesting species of birds to be met with as he or she pursues some other quest up river valleys and across mountain passes. I had the great good fortune to make an acquaintance with Himalayan species while a high school student at Landour, Mussoorie, U.P., and on treks in the Nag Tibba area and beyond to Dodi Tal and the ridges above the Hanuman Chatti. More recently, while living in Pakistan, I was able to visit the mountains that surround the northern end of the Himalaya: the Kaghan Ranges, the trans-Indus Kohistan, which incorporates the fabled Valley of Swat, and the upper Bashkar Valley of the Buni Zom Range in South-eastern Chitral.

As these were usually climbing trips, and my duties seemingly always entailed hiring porters, moving equipment, and setting up camps, it was not possible to do any concentrated bird watching. Hence, this list is not intended to be a comprehensive one, but rather an example of the variety of birds that can be seen along an Himalayan trail and the pleasure they can afford the amateur bird watcher.

The specific trail in question here is that which begins at Matiltan (8,000'), the road-head, in the Ushu (ooshoo) Valley of Kalam Tehsil, Swat, from which we departed on June 11, 1975. Our route (see Figure 1), took us up the Ushu and across the Kachakhani Pass (c. 15,600) into the Bashkar Gol of Chitral. We then proceeded up the Bashkar Valley, attempted Ghochhar Sar, and returned to upper Swat via the Manali Pass (c. 16,100) and the unmapped Gabral Valley. The list below describes the birds seen on this trip, but I have also taken the liberty of adding some notes from previous trips in Swat, as well as some from the Kaghan Valley, where the Chitral group spent a week prior to going to Matiltan. For those interested, I have also appended a list of birds seen at Nathiagali during a three-day stay in April 1975.

It should be noted that wherever possible observation was made with the aid of field glasses. Identification was made with reference to Sálím Ali's *INDIAN HILL BIRDS*, (Bombay: OUP, 1949), and S. Dillon Ripley's *A SYNOPSIS OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN*, (Bombay: BNHS, 1961). The number given for each species below refers to the number of that species in Ripley's *SYNOPSIS*.

166 *Aquila chrysaetos*, Himalayan Golden Eagle.

On the same day, but at a higher altitude (12,800), as 213, we watched as one of these magnificent birds put up a covey of pheasant (see 305).

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181 *Gyps himalayensis*, Himalayan Griffon Vulture.

Watched this bird patrolling the Bashkar Gol around Gareek one evening, and saw him again the next morning as we walked up to the lake—June 27 and 28, 1975.

213 *Falco subbuteo*, Central Asian Hobby.

Observed in June 1974 on the ridges east above the Mahodand Meadows, at about

11,500. In March 1975, I saw this species at about 7,500 near the village of Nakkai Imam Chatti on the lower slopes of Musa ka Musela and in June 1975 on the upper ridges of the same mountain (about 12,000) in the Kaghan Valley.

236 *Alectoris graeca*, Chukor Partridge.

Heard and observed in the early morning at the Willow Camp in an area of meadow

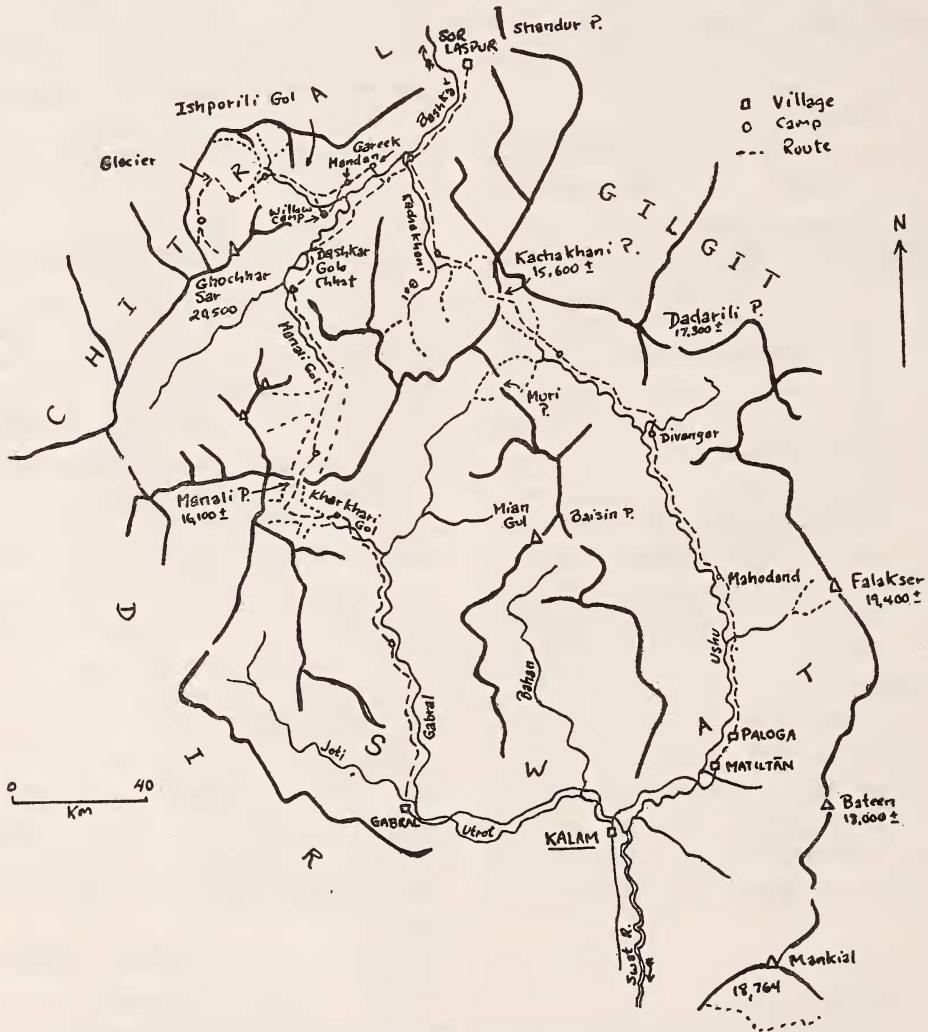


Fig. 1. Sketch map of Author's route to Chitral.

interspersed with large boulders.

305 **Pucrasia macrolopha**, Koklas Pheasant.

A covey of five birds was put up by a Golden Eagle at about 12,800' on the meadows to the east high above Mahodand. What was memorable about this event was the opportunity to see how the covey seemed to send out a decoy when frightened by the eagle. We were resting on a small alp when the eagle appeared. The main body of pheasant flew low to the ground down the ridge, while one bird detached itself, flew out behind our alp and rejoined the covey behind a screening ridge. The eagle made no predatory move. See diagram below (Fig. 2).

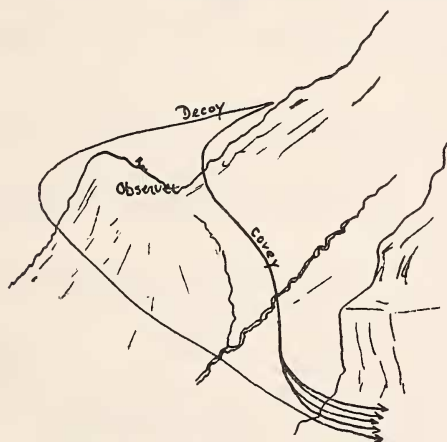


Fig. 2

513 **Columba leuconota**, Snow Pigeon.

Saw a pair just above the confluence of the Kharkhari Gol with the Gabral River. Though familiar with the bird from the excellent colour plate in Ali's HILL BIRDS, this was my first actual sighting of this species. I was surprised at how large a bird it was. One of the pair made several slow, wide sallies over the valley before returning to perch on a large boulder. The effect of the flight as well as the predom-

inant whiteness of the bird while in flight almost reminded one of gulls at the seashore. Identification through glasses was unmistakable. Was thrilled to see this species.

515 **Columba rupestris (turkestanica)**, Turkestan Rock Pigeon.

Also a first sighting. This occurred in the Ishporili Gol, at the terminus of the Ishporili Glacier moraine (c. 13,800). The birds were brought to my attention by one of our Chitrali porters, who was also a shikari. He had earlier used the glasses to spot a large herd of markhor. Without his aid, I would not have seen these birds, as they were extremely well-camouflaged against high cliffs.

580 **Cuculus saturatus**, Himalayan Cuckoo.

We heard this bird almost every evening while in the Bashkar Gol below the lake, especially around Mandan and the Willow Camp, where this species was finally spotted in a grove of stunted birch—June 26, 1975.

694 **Apus melba**, Alpine Swift.

As in 913 below. A large swift. The evening swarms above the Bashkar Lake seemed tireless.

913 **Hirundo rupestris**, Crag Martin.

Noted all through the Bashkar, Kachakhani, Ishporili and Manali Gols, in company with the Alpine Swifts and House Martins. The birds were very active over the rivers and especially over the Bashkar Lake in the mornings and evenings. At the latter place, there were hundreds of birds—in clouds it seemed—dashing all over the sky above the lake with their incredibly swift and intricate aerial dynamics. With the swifts and other martins, they appear to nest in the vast cliffs above the lake.

916 **Hirundo rustica**, Common Swallow.

Very common in the lower Swat valley in the towns both above and below Mingora. Hundreds swarm in the streets down to a foot

or two above the ground amongst crowds and traffic—incredibly, without colliding with anything or anyone. A familiar sight in early July are the long lines of swallows on telephone wires.

931 *Delichon urbica*, House Martin.

As 913.

1022 *Garrulus lanceolatus*, Blackthroated Jay.

Seen at Bela Village (6,300), above Paras, Kaghan Valley, March 27, 1975.

1029 *Pica pica (bactriana)*, Kashmir or Whiterumped Magpie.

In and around Sor Laspur and once at Mandan, I noticed a Magpie-like bird with a prominent tail, black and white colouring, and a conspicuous white patch on the wing. He seemed fond of the Poplar groves around the fields of Laspur. This was an entirely new species for me, so I made sketches and later identified the species with the aid of Mr. J. Bruce Amstutz.

1045 *Pyrhacorax graculus*, Yellowbilled Chough.

We spotted this bird at about 11,000 on Makra above the FRH at Shongran in the Kaghan Valley on June 4, 1975. In the Ushu Valley, the bird first begins to appear at the place where the Falakser Dhand (torrent) meets the Ushu about 11 miles beyond Matiltan. From that point (ca. 10,000) we noted it at least once a day to the Kachakhani Pass. It was common in the areas of Chitral which we visited, especially around the great cliffs above the Willow Camp (11,500) where there were numerous nesting pairs. The species seems most gregarious. One evening I watched a flock of perhaps sixty to eighty birds feeding together in open grassy terrain in the moraine hills above the Willow Camp. The highest we saw this bird in Chitral was at about 18,000' above the Ishporili Gla-

cier—the same height at which I saw a small flock of this species on Mankial (Swat) in August 1974. This Chough was also common in the Manali and Kharkhari Gols. Strangely, although I looked for but did not see *P. pyrhoracorax*.

1053 *Corvus monedula*, Jackdaw.

Fairly common around the Rest House, Balakot, Kaghan Valley (Hazara) in March 1975.

1059 *Corvus corax*, Raven.

Noted a pair at the Mahodand Meadows (c. 10,500), Ushu Valley, Swat on June 6 and 7, 1974. They kept to a dense stand of pines at the north end of the meadows and at first seemed agitated at our arrival. Their raucous, duck-like call is unforgettable.

1085 *Pericrocotus ethologus*, Longtailed Minivet.

Noted several breeding pairs at Shongran FRH, Kaghan Valley in early June 1975. Keeps very much to stands of pine.

1125 *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, Whitecheeked Bulbul.

At Balakot (3,300) and Paras (4,300), in the Kaghan Valley, March 27, 1975.

1289 *Garrulax variegatum*, Variegated Laughing Thrush.

First met with this species while on a morning walk up the torrent above Kalam, Swat, at about 8,000, in an open fir and deciduous forest with an undergrowth of Redbud and May Apple. Saw this bird several times and heard its remarkable song, which seems to be preceded by a low hum. I came close enough to one to frighten it from its nest, which, finally found, was a well-made cup of grass and pine needles placed about 4 inches off the ground in a verdant patch of flowers and small shrubs. The nest contained no eggs. This occurred on June 11, 1974. On June 13, 1975 at Divangar (lit. Diwan-ghar) in the

Ushu Valley, we heard this species several times. It was observed once in the extensive undergrowth by the pond at the Willow Camp in the Ishporili Gol (11,500). We also heard another thrush, but did not see it: could it have been the Plain-Backed Mountain Thrush?

1313 *Garrulax lineatus*, Streaked Laughing Thrush.

Noted a thrush song around Sor Laspur (9,700')—our lowest altitude in Chitral—and saw several birds there in willow and poplar thickets. It is a small thrush, gregarious and most active in flocks on the ground.

1396 *Heterophasia capistrata*, Blackheaded Sibia.

Saw one bird in a grove below Madyan (c. 4,000), middle Swat, July 4, 1975. This area is somewhat west of Ali's distribution range for this species.

1579 *Phylloscopus affinis*, Tickell's Leaf Warbler.

Fairly common in early June 1974 at the Mahodand Meadows (10,500), Ushu Valley, Swat.

1650 *Erithacus brunneus*, Blue Chat.

Believe I spotted a pair (M and F) by the Kunhar River at Balakot (3,300'), Kaghan Valley, March 30, 1975. Noted, June 3 and 4, 1975, along the meadows at Shongran FRH and in the thickets along the road from Sarai (9,000) towards Makra Peak.

1654 *Erithacus cyanurus*, Orange-flanked Bush Robin.

Found this species to be quite common—noted at Sor Laspur (9,700), the Kachakhani Gol (10,200), at Mandan (11,500), in the Ishporili Gol (up to 14,000), and at and above the Bashkar Golo Chhat, both male and female. It seems to enjoy clumps of stunted birch and willow, though it is also common along streams with a sparse covering of under-

growth over rocky terrain. Its colours are not so brilliant as those of Plate 26 in Ali's HILL BIRDS. We called this the "paper-tearing bird," because its song is always followed by an abrasive sound, as if paper is being torn.

1675 *Phoenicurus frontalis*, Bluefronted Redstart.

Noted only once during the trip—on a small tributary of the Bashkar just below the Bashkar Golo Chhat (lake) at 11,900'.

1679 *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*, Plumbeous Redstart.

As above, common in the Kaghan and Swat Valleys. We did not see this species in Chitral, but began to see it again in the Gabral Valley.

1680 *Hodgsonius phoenicuroides*, Hodgson's Shortwing.

Commonly seen in the Bashkar Valley of Chitral, from 10,000 to 14,000 feet. It seemed to be always present, especially favouring rocky ground with patchy ground cover. In the Ishporili, it was to be found in places that were still covered with winter snow—though it was melting rapidly.

1688 *Enicurus maculatus*, Spotted Fork-tail.

Noted at Bahrein (6,000'), middle Swat, August 23, 1973. This was the only time I saw this bird in this part of the sub-continent. It seems to be considerably less common here than in Tehri-Garhwal, India.

1697 *Saxicola torquata*, Collared Bush-chat.

Noted at about 7,500 on the road from Bela Village to the Sharan FRH, Kaghan Valley. In March 1975, I had noted this species at Paras, beside the Kunhar River. It seems to have moved up some three thousand feet and is probably nesting in the scrub forest along Sharan Road and around the terraced fields.

1700 *Saxicola caprata*, Pied Bush Chat.

A familiar bird in the sparse growth along the Kunhar below Balakot. Also, commonly seen during the cold season north of the Salt Range.

1705 *Saxicola ferrea*, Dark Grey Bushchat.

Spotted in the Gabral Valley, at about 9,000', Upper Swat, July 3, 1975.

1716 *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*, White-capped Redstart.

This species is to be seen frequently along the Kunhar, Swat, Ushu and Gabral Rivers. It was seen only once in Chitral—at Sor Laspur, but here its colouring was rather washed-out as compared to the bird in upper Swat. Otherwise, we did not see this bird in Chitral, quite possibly because we remained at too high altitudes while in Chitral. However, once across the Manali An (Pass) and into the Kharkhari Gol, we began to see it once again.

1726 *Monticola solitarius*, Blue Rock Thrush.

Spotted at Gareek (c. 10,800'). Bashkar Valley. It remained atop a huge boulder for some minutes while I observed through glasses.

1729 *Myiophonus caeruleus*, Himalayan Whistling Thrush.

A much loved bird—noted several times in the Ushu Valley, Swat, but never above 10,500 feet. Not seen in Chitral at all, but we did see it several times again in the Kharkhari Gol, where the torrent and grass-covered cliffs made for an ideal nesting site. In this area it seems a silent and subdued bird—a little disappointing for one who knows the Mussoorie area well.

1773 *Cinclus cinclus*, Kashmir Dipper.

First saw this species in June 1974 along the sand banks of the Ushu at the Mahodand Meadows. In June 1975, met this bird twice

in the Upper Ushu—once at Divangar and once at a point about two miles above Divangar where the river broadens out and flows quite calmly for several hundred yards. At the latter place, where the bird was seen at mid-morning, the Kashmir Dipper was wading along sand shoals and taking short, restless flights up and down the river. At Divangar, the previous evening, I watched a Dipper for quite some time, noted its bobbing and curtsying manner and saw it disappear into very swift water several times in search of food: a most lively display. Divangar is at an altitude of about 11,500'.

1775 *Cinclus pallasi*, Brown Dipper.

Believe I spotted this bird along the Ushu River about a mile and a half below Divangar, where we had halted for lunch. It seemed to be in a great hurry and was kept under observation for only a few moments.

1782 *Prunella strophciata*, Rufousbreasted Hedgesparrow or Accentor.

Fairly common in the extensive meadows at Gareek and around Willow Camp. Also noted in the Ishporili and Bashkar Gols, in the latter place, especially around the lake.

1792 *Parus major*, Grey Tit.

At the Nadi FRH (locally known as the Kund Bungalow), at 7,800 above Balakot, Kaghan Valley on April 29, 1974. This species seems far less common in Hazara and Swat, as compared to the Mussoorie area in U.P., India.

1802 *Parus melanolophus*, Crested Black Tit.

Also noted at the Mahodand Meadows, Ushu Valley and in the Gabral Valley, both in Swat, June 1975.

1804 *Parus rubiventris*, Rufousbellied Crested Tit.

Common in the evergreen stands around the Mahodand Meadows in June 1974 and

1975. The species is most active during the early mornings and late evenings and has a most attractive double whistle.

1807 **Parus dichrous**, Brown Crested Tit.

Sighting uncertain. I thought I saw this species in the great forest behind Sharan FRH in the Kaghan Valley at about 9,000'. But, having discussed this possibility with Mr. Tom Roberts of Karachi, I must bow to his vast experience and record this sighting as unlikely.

1855 **Anthus trivialis**, Tree Pipit.

Found in the groves around Sor Laspur.

1883 **Motacilla citreola**, Yellowheaded Wagtail.

One of the commoner birds on the trip. Noticed often in the upper Ushu Valley. Except for the Chough, this was the last bird we saw before ascending the Kachakhani Pass. It was at the very last portion of open water on the Ushu (c. 13,900). It was also present in the Bashkar Gol. A breeding pair was noted around the large pond at the Willow Camp. The male in breeding plumage is a brilliant yellow, and this and the antics of the fellow at Willow Camp on more than one occasion brought out our party's telephoto lenses.

1886 **Motacilla alba (personata)**, Masked Wagtail.

Was quite surprised at meeting with this species. Observed at a small pond in the meadows which cover the moraine hills just above and between the confluence of the Ishporili with the Bashkar Gol.

1887 **Motacilla alba**, Hodgson's Pied Wagtail.

Observed at Gareek (10,800), Bashkar Valley.

1946 **Passer rutilans**, Cinnamon Tree Sparrow.

Several nesting pairs around the FRH,

Shongran, Kaghan.

1982 **Mycerobas icterioides**, Black-and-Yellow Grosbeak.

Noted once in a forested area, Gabral Valley, Swat, at about 8,000.

1989 **Carduelis carduelis (caniceps)**, Himalayan Goldfinch.

Noted a small flock of about two miles above Sor Laspur at about 10,000 feet. This was at the first stand of poplar and willow that one comes to upon walking down the valley.

1990 **Carduelis spinoides**, Himalayan Greenfinch.

First noted at Bara (8,000) in the Chukail Valley, Swat in August 1974. On the Chitral trip, we saw this species at Gareek (10,800), Bashkar Gol.

2010 **Carpodacus erythrinus**, Rosefinch.

Enjoyed watching this species very much. Active and busy—spotted several times at Mandan (11,500), both male and female, in pairs or flocks of four or more. Also noted at the Bashkar Golo Chhat (12,000). The male is distinctly rose-coloured around the head, nape and throat, but elsewhere this fades into a light brown colour, just perceptibly tinged with pink.

2051 **Emberiza cia**, Meadow Bunting.

Common in the Ushu, Gabral and Bashkar Valleys.

BIRD LIST, NATHIAGALI, PAKISTAN, APRIL 27-30, 1975.

580 **Cuculus saturatus**, Himalayan Cuckoo.

Nathiagali.

662 **Strix aluco**, Himalayan Wood Owl.
On Miran Jani at about 9,000.

807 **Picus squamatus**, Scalybellied Green Woodpecker.

Common at Nathiagali.

- 836 **Picoides himalayensis**, Himalayan
Pied Woodpecker.
Nathiagali.
- 842 **Picoides auriceps**, Brownfronted Pied
Woodpecker.
Nathiagali.
- 1042 **Nucifraga caryocatactes**, Largespot-
ted Nutcracker.
Nathiagali, 8,100.
- 1148 **Hypsipetes madagascariensis**, Black
Bulbul.
Nathiagali.
- 1181 **Pomatorhinus erythrogenys**, Rusty-
cheeked Scimitar Babbler.
Nathiagali.
- 1341 **Pteruthius flaviscapis**, Redwinged
Shrike-babbler.
Nathiagali.
- 1342 **Pteruthius xanthochloris**, Green
Shrike-babbler.
Tentative sighting, Nathiagali.
- 1396 **Heterophasia capistrata**, Blackhead-
ed Sibia.
Nathiagali.
- 1421 **Muscicapa superciliaris**, White-
browed Blue Flycatcher.
Common at Nathiagali.
- 1445 **Muscicapa thalassina**, Verditer Fly-
catcher.
Nathiagali.
- 1606 **Phylloscopus occipitalis**, Large
Crowned Willow Warbler.
Nathiagali.
- 1705 **Saxicola ferrea**, Dark-grey Bush
Chat.
Common at Nathiagali, also frequently
seen on Miran Jani at 9,100.
- 1723 **Monticola cinclorhynchus**, Bluehead-
ed Rock Thrush.
Several times at Nathiagali.
- 1824 **Sitta europaea**, Kashmir Nuthatch.
Miran Jani, 9,000.
- 1832 **Sitta leucopsis**, Whitecheeked Nut-
hatch.
Nathiagali.
- 1845 **Certhia himalayana**, Himalayan Tree
Creeper.
Nathiagali.
- 1946 **Passer rutilans**, Cinnamon Tree Spar-
row.
Common at Nathiagali.
- 1982 **Mycerobas icterioides**, Black-and-
Yellow Grosbeak.
Common at Nathiagali.
- 1983 **Mycerobas affinis**, Allied Grosbeak
Nathiagali.